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MARYLAND'S HARD-CRAB BUSINESS*

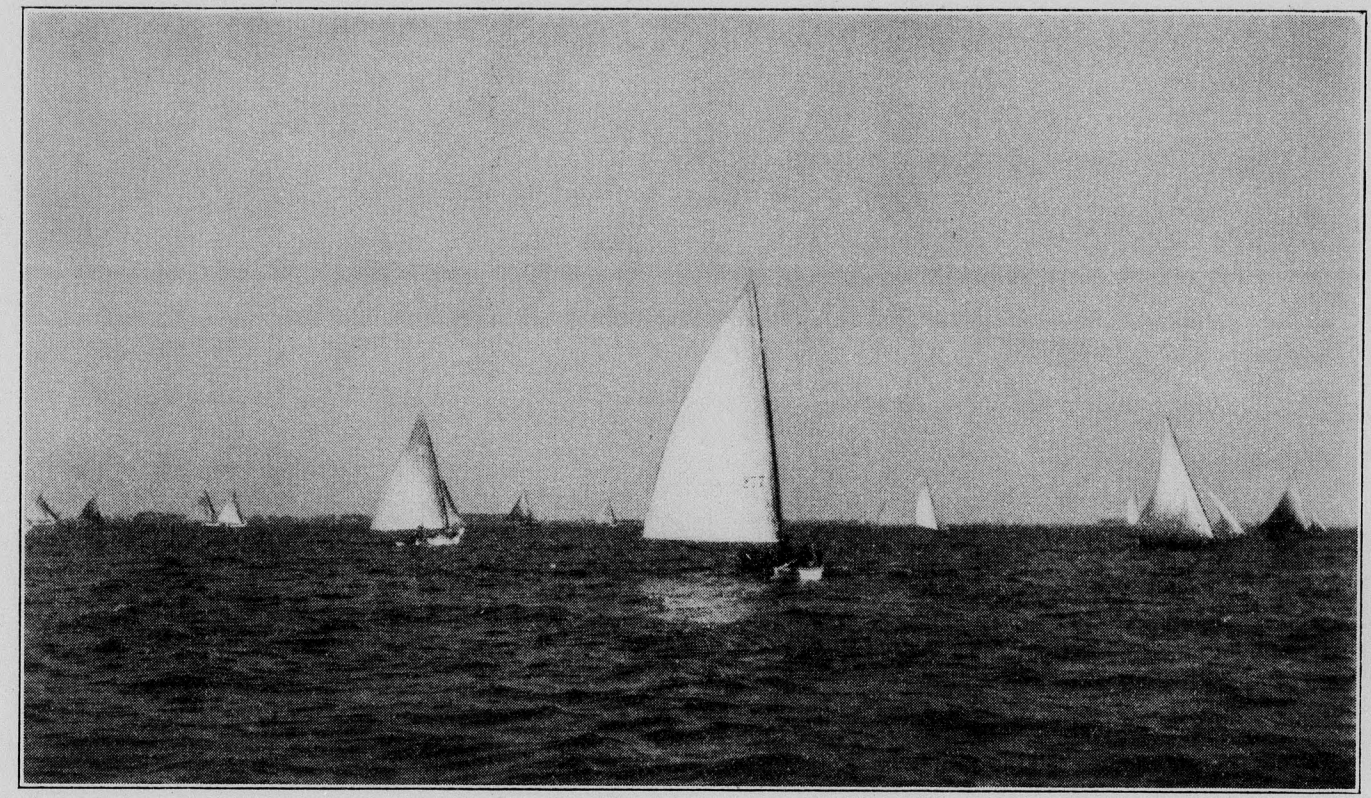
**A report submitted to the Conservation Commissioner by M. C. Greer, State Sea Food Auditor, relative to methods of merchandising among the crab dealers of the State.*

THE HARD-CRAB industry of Maryland has entered upon a new era. The last two years' experiences in the crab business show the need of a different method of merchandising among the crab-meat packers and the live-hard-crab shippers.

In 1928 the supply of hard crabs was the best it had been for years and in 1929 those engaged in the business handled 30 per cent. more crabs than in 1928. The tremendous increase in the available supply of hard crabs has left definite marks upon the industry. The production statistics and other data on the crab business show facts that signify the new era, and show that the crab-meat producers, large and small, must change their marketing methods to meet the new demands.

The following facts should be considered:

First—The number of crabs marketed in 1929 was 30 per cent. more than in 1928.



Crabbing Fleet In Tangier Sound

A FLEET OF SEVERAL HUNDRED SKIPJACKS AT WORK OVER THE GRASSY BOTTOMS OFF SMITH'S ISLAND IS A COMMON SIGHT AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CRABBING SEASON. ACCORDING TO AVAILABLE STATISTICS, MARYLAND MARKETED IN 1929, 67,026,722 HARD AND SOFT CRABS.

Second—The crabs marketed north of the Choptank River show an increase of 135 per cent. over 1928. Even with this tremendous increase, all of the available supply could not be marketed.

Third—There is a much larger percentage of large or "Jimmy" crabs among those caught above the Choptank than below it.

Fourth—The available supply of hard crabs below the Choptank was at least 100 per cent. more than those marketed.

Fifth—Both the barrel-crabs and crab-meat markets of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were absolutely glutted at times, which caused large losses among the shippers.

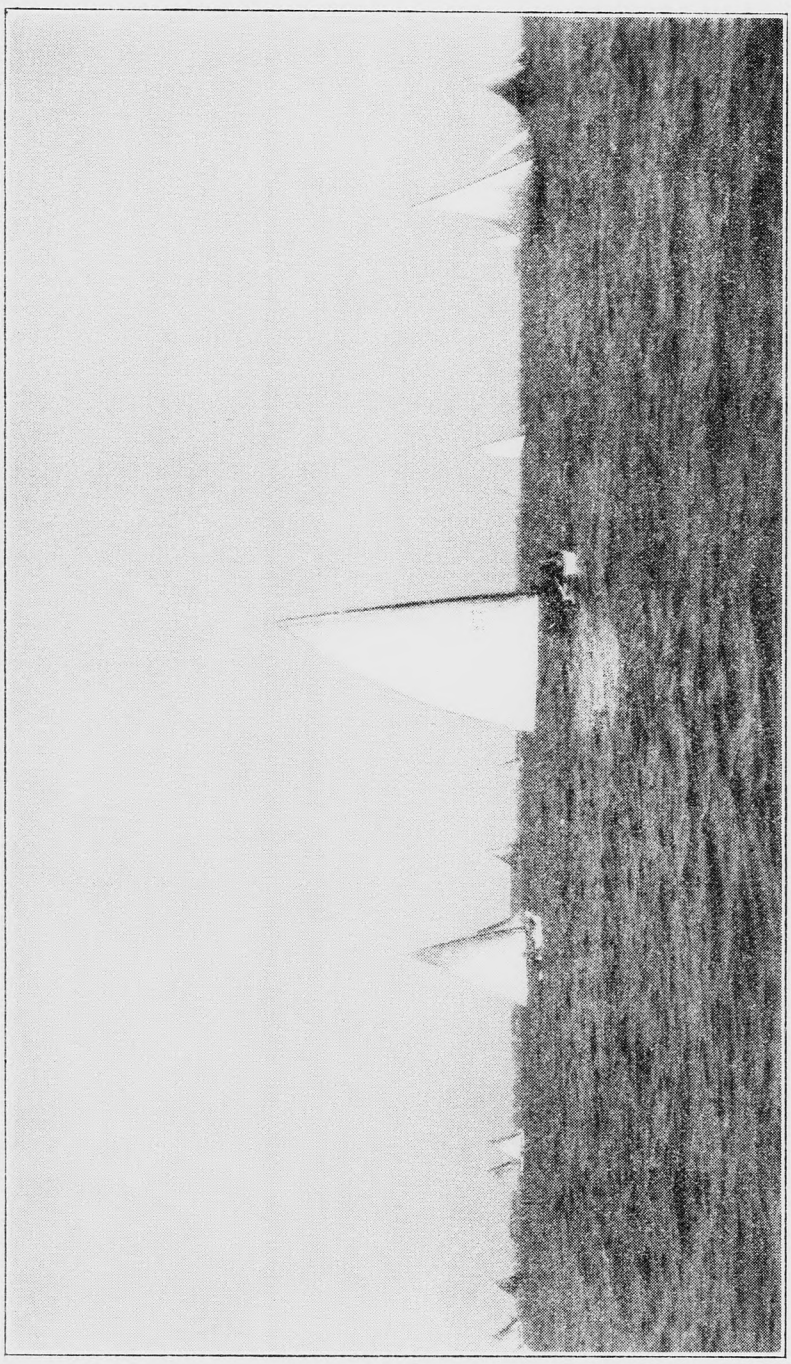
Sixth—The 1929 production of the packing-houses most remote from the market or transportation facilities shows a distinct falling off over the previous year.

The increased supply of hard crabs, which we have every reason to believe will continue to be available, and present marketing methods are responsible for the facts enumerated. Thus for the packer to get his full measure of profit and for the general public to get the benefit of the long-wanted increase in the supply of crabs, it is necessary for the packers and shippers to utilize other markets than the time-honored and overworked ones of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

The majority of the hard-crab shippers and crab-meat shippers use these time-honored markets. For this reason, the large majority of them have not made a startling amount of profit or even used the raw material available. This, to the detriment of their communities. The enterprising dealers, large and small, have made a much greater percentage of net profit and have a more staple business because they have put their products in the hands of the retailer, brought the ultimate consumer in closer touch with the producer.

Markets subject to frequent gluts cannot maintain prices at a sufficiently high level to insure a profit to the producers. Neither does the ultimate consumer benefit by the sharp declines of the wholesale markets. A steady, dependable production, intelligently marketed, will give the public the benefit of lower prices, create a much larger demand and increase the profits of the packers.

A typical example of present marketing conditions is as follows: A crab-meat producer packs a large quantity of meat expecting to ship it to the distributor with whom he has been dealing regularly. For some reason (probably because he has bought on the glutted market) the distributor wires the packer that he cannot accept the full shipment. The packer then ships the acceptable quantity to the distributor and sends the balance to be sold on commission in the open market. The quantity thus sold is usually sold at a severe loss to the producer. The wholesaler, who had paid the packer a profit, ships the meat to the retailers, taking a profit himself. The retail stores or restaurants sell to the consumer and also take a profit.



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This type of marketing easily shows why the ultimate consumer pays such high prices for crabs and crab-meat and why the producer has all he can do to keep going. This situation could be changed to benefit both the producer and the consumer by more advanced merchandising methods.

The producer should find encouragement to change his marketing methods when he considers that the very nature of his goods demands that they be handled expeditiously, and that direct shipping places a better and fresher product before the consumer and that the net profit per unit will be much greater. Practically all crab-producing centers are served by excellent express and truck service.

Some packers feel that their credit risks would be increased too much to permit them to ship to retail dealers or that it would take too much capital to do this type of business. Credit information is easily available and the risk is over quite a spread; therefore, a few small collection losses would not affect them as seriously as if they had all the eggs in one basket. It is doubtful if more capital would be necessary to carry the business along different lines, and, in consideration of the increased net profit, the volume of the business could be cut down until sufficient working capital has been built up with which to expand.

The supply of hard crabs in Maryland waters has been greatly increased, and there is no reason to believe that it will not be continuous. Marketing methods should be adjusted accordingly, and everyone, from the catcher to the consumer, receive the benefit due him.

COMPARATIVE REPORT ON CRAB BUSINESS

	Season 1928		Season 1929	
	Barrels Hard Crabs	Number Peelers	Barrels Hard Crabs	Number Peelers
Baltimore City	6,077	9,476	11,663	4,261
Annapolis	2,961	10,948	3,080	13,407
Galesville	567	19,248	281	91,008
Bromes Island	------	------	2,050	------
Solomons, etc.	2,518	25,628	358	3,574
Benedict	------	------	------	------
Bushwood, Rock Pt., etc.	6,616	42,060	8,572	84,684
Ridge, Wynne, Airedale	5,581	58,016	8,368	61,300
Rock Hall, etc.	------	------	------	------
Kent Island	2,078	------	5,628	13,003
Claiborne and St. Michaels	6,427	------	16,074	------
Tilghmans, etc.	6,118	6,853	13,012	6,112
Oxford and Bellevue	6,977	------	18,979	1,000
Cambridge and Secretary	16,355	20,000	12,307	30,000
Hoopersville, Fishing Creek	24,822	127,610	35,328	439,063
Wingate, Toddville, etc.	21,918	815,989	28,344	605,686
Elliott's Island	4,375	33,915	3,191	11,041
Taylor's Island and Hudson	1,816	------	2,694	------
Bivalve, Tyaskin, Nanticoke	------	------	------	------
Mt. Vernon	------	------	------	------

	Season 1928		Season 1929	
	Barrels Hard Crabs	Number Peelers	Barrels Hard Crabs	Number Peelers
Deal's Island	28,589	2,213,569	19,932	2,094,385
Marion Station and Rumbly	247	1,129,444	------	1,910,000
Maddox, Fishing Island	------	------	------	------
Crisfield	10,798	4,516,599	14,342	4,716,747
Smith's Island	3,860	4,238,661	3,869	4,528,091
Worcester County	2,075	70,500	1,400	45,000
Totals	160,775	13,338,516	209,472	14,658,722
Number of hard crabs (250 to a barrel)		40,193,750		52,368,000
Total number of crabs caught		53,532,266		67,026,722

Increase ---------- 13,494,456 crabs or 25 per cent.
Increase in hard crabs-- 48,697 barrels or 30 per cent.
Increase in peelers----- 1,320,206 crabs or 9 per cent.

Note: Weight per barrel of hard crabs averaged at 100 pounds.

Notes on crab production: The above statement is compiled from reports made by dealers and individual crabbers from the districts indicated. This report shows where the crabs were first handled commercially, i. e., credit for production of crabs shipped to Baltimore by county dealers is given to district shipping crabs. The crabs shown handled by Baltimore are those received from individual crabbers.

The hard crabs reported by Crisfield are only those caught in Maryland waters. It is estimated by Crisfield dealers that 90 per cent. of the hard crabs handled there are from out-of-State waters.

SEED OYSTERS

WITHOUT DOUBT, the seed-oyster question is one of the most important ones confronting the oyster industry of Maryland and Virginia today. With an increasing number of planters in both states, there is a greater demand for seed oysters than ever before, and, without seed, the planter will have to depend upon shell planting and growing his own seed.

From investigations made by the State Biologist, localities like Honga River have proved most exceptional for the growing of seed, and the department intends to devote much of its attention to this work in a river like the Honga, in order to meet the demand of our lessees.

Heretofore, the planters of Maryland have been able to get oysters from the James River in Virginia, when the head-of-the Bay bars failed to furnish a supply. Two years ago over 300,000 bushels of seed were taken from the head of the Bay and sold to Maryland planters. Last year, due to freshets, no seed was available, and a recent investigation made by Chief Inspector Townsend and two of the department's deputy commanders showed that it would not be wise to strip the bars of all shells and small oysters this coming spring.

The Chester River will no doubt supply a number of oysters to be transplanted to private beds within the waters of Maryland

and also in the waters of Virginia. However, these oysters must be three inches from hinge to mouth, with only an allowance of five per cent. under that size. Naturally, for best results, from the planter's view-point, this is not the most desirable seed. For the planter to get best results he must count on from 1,000 to 1,200 oysters to a bushel. The profit is not sufficiently great to cover the risk in transplanting oysters of legal size.

North Carolina oysters, which were sold to planters in lower Somerset, especially along the Pocomoke, have done very well in the past. In fact, the results there have been better than in any other waters where they were planted. James River oysters do very well in Maryland, but the Virginia Legislature, which has just adjourned, has increased the tax on oysters going out of the state, which will naturally have its effect on the quantity of seed stock brought into Maryland from that river.

Since the steam houses opened in Baltimore late in February, there has been considerable demand for oysters from the head of the Bay for steam stock, regardless of the fact that these oysters contain "green". For this reason they are only suitable for canning or transplanting. If they were permitted to be taken to houses dealing in raw trade only, it would affect sales and destroy the oyster market of Maryland. The dredge boats, which have not had a good season down the Bay, have done very well since the steam houses opened in Baltimore, but naturally this period of work is limited.

The control of the head of the Bay from Sandy Point northward should be under the Conservation Department to regulate. Hardly two successive years show the same results in that section, and the application of the laws on the statute books often works a hardship on the waterman, at the same time failing to conserve oysters.

The Virginia Legislature, which has just adjourned, saw fit to give the Commissioner of Fisheries of Virginia full authority to regulate the oyster and fin fisheries in their waters. We feel that this is a step forward. When the measure was first proposed it met with some opposition, but when the vote was finally taken it was passed by a very large majority.

WASHINGTON WALTONIANS HOLD INITIAL MEETING IN CAPITAL

THE FIRST ANNUAL meeting and banquet of the Washington (D. C.) Chapter of the Izaak Walton League was held at the Hotel Raleigh on February 19. Through the active work of Dr. D'arcy Magee, president, and Mr. Perry Miller, chairman of the Entertainment Committee, one of the most interesting programs was carried out. The attendance numbered about 300

persons, including about a hundred women. Those who spoke at the meeting were: Senator Harry B. Hawes, of Missouri; Representative Wm. B. Bankhead, of Alabama; Commissioner Henry O'Malley, of the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries; Paul G. Redington, chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey; Swepson Earle, Conservation Commissioner of Maryland; E. Lee LéCompte, Game Warden of Maryland; A. Willis Robertson, chairman, Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries of Virginia, and C. Seymour Bulloch, national representative of the parent organization of the Izaak Walton League in Chicago.

In consideration of the fact that Washington anglers use the waters of Maryland extensively and resort to our streams for the catching of trout, as well as of bass, considerable interest was manifested in the work Maryland is doing to rear trout to legal size before planting them in the public streams, as outlined by Commissioner Earle.

Another question of great importance to the Izaak Walton League of Washington is that of pollution of the public waters. The Potomac River on which the National Capitol is located has suffered from the effects of pollution for a long period. It was brought out that the Potomac was polluted in stretches from Piedmont to Quantico and that the City of Washington was responsible for a large share in this pollution. It was suggested that the Izaak Walton League would be doing a great work to use its influence in having the sewerage waste from the city properly disposed of instead of having it go into the Potomac River as at present. Cumberland and other cities were also referred to as aiding in the pollution of the Potomac River, as well as a number of large manufacturing plants.

The president of the Washington Chapter informed the audience that steps are already being taken to put an end to the pollution of the Potomac at Washington, and it is believed that through the activity of this chapter something will be done that will bring lasting benefits.

YELLOW-PERCH HATCHERY

THE SEVERN RIVER hatchery is once more proving that it is located on the best stream of the State for the hatching of yellow perch. The department started its activities at this station on February 17, and in less than a week the first spawn was collected, being nearly two weeks in advance of last season, when the first spawn was collected on March 9.

Up to March 10 there had been 5,216 quarts of spawn collected, which is 197 quarts more than the work for the entire season last year, and this season's work is not yet completed.

For the information of those who may be interested, one quart of eggs is estimated to contain 100,000 eggs. At this rate,

the department has collected so far this season, 521,600,000 eggs. Reports, however, from the Severn River station indicate that the eggs are not so fertile as usual. The greatest trouble this season seems to be that the milts ascended the river much earlier than the roe perch and it is presumed that a great many (milts) were caught by fishermen, who, in spite of every precaution, operate illegal nets and thereby ruin a great many eggs.

Severn River has been closed against all kinds of fishing, except hook and line, for the past 16 years, and, although the department makes a number of arrests and destroys many nets each year, it seems practically impossible to entirely break up the practice. On the night of March 9, 19 traps were taken out of the river by one of the department's deputies, each filled with fish. A great many of the fish were dead and large quantities of eggs were found on the shore, lost from fish which had already been caught and loaded on trucks for market. It is unfortunate that in nearly every case of arrest appeals have been taken to court by the offenders, and they have been generally acquitted on some technicality, which makes it very difficult for the department to enforce this law prohibiting fishing with nets in Severn River.

SHELL-PLANTING OPERATIONS

The department, through the aid of the Advisory Committee, has been fortunate in contracting for between 700,000 and 800,000 bushels of oyster shells for planting during the coming spring and early summer. This will exceed the work of any previous year, and the department feels very much encouraged by the coöperation it is getting from the tidewater counties, the packers, and the watermen.

There is no question about the value of shell planting in the tributary waters. The reports to the department from many sources and from our own investigations prove that shells planted, in most cases, show a good supply of young oysters attached, and the department is receiving petitions and demands for more extensive shell planting in localities where little interest was shown in this work heretofore. It has only been, however, since 1927 that a sufficient quantity of shells has been spread on the bottoms to make any showing.

With the work outlined for this year, and including the operations for the past two years, we should have 2,000,000 bushels of oyster shells on the depleted oyster bars. These shells have been spread overboard accurately and in good condition, and, if they have failed to catch a set of spat the first year, we know that they are there for the run of spat when it does appear.

Examinations made on shells planted in 1928 and 1929 show these shells to be clean and in good condition for a catch.

NOTICE TO FISHERMEN

We desire to call your attention to the lawful seasons for the catching of shad and herring in the waters of this State.

These seasons were provided for during the General Assembly of 1929 and went into effect on June 1 of that year, making this the first season in which the law is operative. You are, therefore, warned not to set nets which will catch shad or herring prior to the time which is legal in your locality.

First—In Chesapeake Bay and tributaries, below Poole's Island, except in Potomac River, March 1 to May 31, both dates inclusive.

Second—In Chesapeake Bay and tributaries, above Poole's Island, March 15 to June 10, both dates inclusive.

Third—In Chincoteague and Sinepuxent Bays and their tributaries, March 1 to May 31, both dates inclusive.

Fourth—In Potomac River, March 1 to May 31, both dates inclusive.

Five—In those rivers, creeks, coves, or inlets where the Conservation Department is engaged in collecting spawn for hatching purposes, the Commissioner is authorized to make such rules and regulations (provided the season is not shortened) during the last 10 days of the season as he may adopt for the better protection of the fish and the collection of spawn for the said hatching purposes.

Yours very truly,

SWEPSON EARLE,
Conservation Commissioner.

CANNED OYSTERS

A report of some interest, on the situation in the Southern Atlantic oyster-producing states with regard to canned oysters, reached the department recently. The information was compiled by the Shelmore Oyster Products Company, of Charleston, S. C., for the American Institute of Food Distribution, from official reports of commissions of fisheries in all of these states, and quotations are given herewith:

Alabama—Department of Game and Fisheries: "In reference to the condition of our oyster reefs, along the Alabama coast, advise that the March floods of 1929 destroyed 85 per cent. of our oysters."

The report further states that there is no canning going on at present in Alabama.

Florida—Shell Fish Commission: "Our principal oyster territory was damaged by the flood waters in 1928 and 1929 and our production has not been as great since that time."

Georgia—State Board of Game and Fish: "The department estimates 50 per cent. of the natural oyster beds were killed during the excessive freshets of 1927 and 1928. At the same

time, our natural reefs were in bad shape due to over-fishing, and in a more or less depleted stage."

Louisiana—Department of Conservation: "Having a good season in Louisiana as far as the oyster pack is concerned, except some of the oysters are unusually small."

Maryland—Conservation Department: "We regret to say that the canned-oyster business in this State this year is at a very low ebb. The principal canners in Baltimore have as yet done practically no business, as the scarcity of the oysters has made the price of raw stock almost prohibitive as far as canning oysters is concerned. They hope, however, to do some packing between now and the close of the season, April 25."

Mississippi—A large part of the Mississippi pack is made from oysters taken in Louisiana waters.

North Carolina—Department of Conservation and Development: "The oysters so far this season are all being used for shipping raw stock. The steamers, or canners, will start up about the middle of February and run until April 15. Think there will be only two (2) canneries running here this season."

South Carolina—While there is no official report from the State Board of Fisheries of South Carolina, it is stated that the flood waters of 1928 and 1929 have done considerable damage. Something less than 50 per cent. of the normal pack has been made.

The report continues with the following comments:

"The consumption of canned oysters is unquestionably increasing, due to the low prices at which they have been retailing for the past few months. Fundamentally, we believe, the canned-oyster market will be in a very strong position, and we expect to see a reaction upwards shortly, as present indications are that the pack will be decidedly shorter than what it has been in the past few years, as an increased consumption is occurring, due to the low prices at which oysters have been retailing this season.

"Stocks are light in packers' hands and particularly light in jobbers' hands.

"The oyster-packing season closes the latter part of April. Indications are now that the stocks will be less at the close of this canning season than has been the case in some years.

"Tariff—During recent years there has been an importation of a considerable quantity of Japanese canned oysters on the Pacific Coast. However, in the present tariff schedule, now before the United States Senate, there is a duty proposed on the importation of canned oysters, which, as soon as passed, will have a decided effect on further importations from Japan."

In connection with the last paragraph of this market report, it may be added that the Senate recently adopted an amendment, proposed by Senator Goldsborough, to the pending tariff bill to provide a duty of eight cents per pound on canned oysters.

DEPARTMENT DISMISSES INSPECTOR

In December, the department found it necessary to suspend one of its inspectors, John W. Creighton, of the Hoopers Island district. A number of charges were filed against him, including: permitting tongers, packers, crabbers, etc., to operate without license, favoritism shown certain tongers in not having to license at all, discrimination against buy boats from other sections coming into the Honga River, and failure to make arrests for violation of the cull laws.

Creighton applied for reinstatement under the Merit System Law, and a final hearing was given him by the Employment Commissioner, at Cambridge, on March 3. The action of the department in dismissing Creighton was upheld by the Employment Commissioner, as he was found guilty on two charges.

VIRGINIA PASSES CONCURRENT LEGISLATION

BEFORE THE LAST meeting of the General Assembly of Maryland, the Conservation Commissioner of Maryland prepared for Governor Ritchie a report dealing with the depletion of the oyster bars of Potomac River, which was offered by the Governor to the Legislature. At the close of the session, no direct steps were taken in the way of appropriations to correct this depletion, but, by Joint Resolution No. 13, the Governor was empowered to commission the Conservation Commissioner to go to the Virginia Legislature and confer with the proper committees on the Potomac River concurrent legislation.

Early in the session of the Virginia Legislature, therefore, Mr. Earle went to Richmond to take up this matter. After conferring with Governor Pollard and the chairmen of the Senate and House committees, it was arranged for him to address the members of the entire Legislature on the needs of the Potomac, and on what work had been done in Maryland relative to shell planting.

Governor Pollard's sea-food program provided for a number of changes in the office of Commissioner of Fisheries and the work in Virginia, including rehabilitation of the depleted oyster bars. With the aid of Senator Robert O. Norris and Delegate William A. Wright, the concurrent legislation passed by Maryland during

the sessions of 1927 and 1929, dealing with oysters and fish nets, was adopted by the Virginia Legislature. It is felt that this is a decided forward step in curtailing the waste in Potomac River, and will also enable the two states to work in closer harmony.

Under the Compact of 1785, the Potomac River, which is within the boundaries of the State of Maryland, has been used in common by Maryland and Virginia, as to the right of fisheries. It was hardly contemplated when this legislation was passed that the oyster would become so important as proved to be the case. At that time fin fish were most important to the citizens of Maryland and Virginia. The natural oyster bars of Potomac, which were very extensive, made a livelihood for from 400 to 600 dredge boats from the period of 1870 to 1900. It is conservatively estimated that this river, even as late as 1912, was producing fisheries to the value of $1,000,000 a year, and had been even more valuable in the past. There was reckless destruction of the oyster bars by both states during the period when the dredge boats were operated by a group of lawless men, when crews were shanghaied, and seed oysters, amounting to two or three million bushels a year, were taken out of the State to Northern markets, and sold as cheaply as seven cents a bushel. This marked the period of breaking the foundation of the oyster rocks of both the Bay and Potomac River. These great rocks had been an accumulation of centuries and they cannot be replaced in a few years.

The Conservation Department, together with the Commission of Fisheries of Virginia and the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries, made a survey of the Potomac in 1928. Dr. Luce's report showed the depleted condition of the bars and recommended extensive planting of shells and seed oysters. Virginia's attitude on conservation, as was expressed by the passage of the Governor's constructive sea-food program, indicates that something will be done to help the Potomac. Virginia went one step further than Maryland in the passage of a law to prevent dredging in the Potomac River. If Maryland, in 1931, passes a similar act, only tongers will be permitted to resort to the Potomac for the taking of oysters.

ROCK SWALLOWS AN EEL

Captain James Haddaway, of Neavitt, stated this week that recently he caught a rock of average size which had in its stomach an eel eighteen inches long. The eel was dead, but perfect in every particular. Many fishermen have brought in rock with little hard crabs in the stomachs, but this is the first instance known in Talbot where this fish had swallowed an eel, especially of this size. The eel was not even scarred.—*Easton Star Democrat.*